



A Whip of Cords

How Christians have used the story of Christ and the money changers as a justification for violence

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Klay describes his youthful enthusiasm for the aestheticized violence of action movies and the controlled violence of sport. Can you think of a moment where you felt something similar (even if it's nothing more serious than enjoying a football or hockey game)? Are such feelings necessarily sinful, bad mental or spiritual habits to be discouraged? Or can a kind of controlled enjoyment of violence be psychologically or morally healthy?

2. This essay surveys a number of diverse interpretations—in the form of Biblical criticism and painting—of the Gospel passage where Jesus drives the money changers from the temple: from Origen, St. Augustine, Alexis-Baker, Cosmas Indicopleustes, as well as El Greco and Rembrandt. Do any of these interpretations strike you as spiritually insightful? Do any strike you as particularly horrifying or misguided?

3. Are there situations where you think a bishop or a priest should commend their flock to enter military service? If so, under what conditions? Can you think of a historical example where such pastoral direction would have been appropriate?

4. Klay describes several early-Christian approaches to the return of soldiers from war, including St. Basil the Great's suggestion that "those whose hands are not clean only abstain from Communion for three years." How does the Church today generally approach the welcoming home of soldiers? Can the Church learn anything from these ancient examples? Do they risk appearing to punish individuals who require spiritual guidance?

5. Klay describes a former priest engaging in a mode of biblical interpretation characterized by "bullshit"—explaining away a difficult passage through an elaborate analogy that offers an entirely different lesson. Are there any stories or passages in the Gospels where you find yourself wanting to engage in a similar bullshitting—stories whose lessons seem too challenging, or contrary to your values, to approach head-on?

6. Klay writes about the image of "Christ as persecutor—you can hear a sigh of relief across the centuries, as this development allows us to sanctify our darkest desires." Is it only our darkest desires that cause us to view Christ as a persecutor? Do we sometimes desire a Christ who is a fighter against injustice and oppression? How can we think about Christ as being on our side against injustice without sanctifying our darkest desires?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING & LISTENING:

Philip G. Porter, "War & Penance," January 2022: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/war-penance>

Phil Klay, "Sops to Humanity," October 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sops-humanity>

Susan Bigelow Reynolds, "Never Again, Again," April 2022: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/never-again-again>

Thomas Merton, "Nuclear War & Christian Responsibility," February 1962: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/nuclear-war-and-christian-responsibility>

Peter Steinfels, "The War Against Just War," June 2017: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/war-against-just-war>

The Commonweal Podcast, "War Without End," October 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/war-without-end>